

The Role of Brand Marketing in Snowboarding: A Comparative Study of Switzerland and New Zealand

Cyrill Spale¹

¹Institute of Sport Science, University of Bern, Switzerland

Introduction: Brands play an essential role in the organizational structure of snowboarding by sponsoring athletes, arranging events, contributing to product development and developing long-term partnerships with other key actors. However, the specialities of their role in scene sports, such as creating identities, networking and brand marketing strategies, have not been extensively researched. This study aims to provide an analysis of the function of brands within the snowboarding subculture by comparing how the sport is organized in Switzerland and New Zealand. Sociological theories of subcultures (Hitzler & Niederbacher, 2010) and social networks (Stegbauer, 2008) are used to define the structures of the sport, whereas marketing and branding theories (Adjouri & Stastny, 2006) help to understand the role of the brands. Snowboarding will be defined as an alternative sports subculture based on characteristics such as aesthetics, adventure and new resources of performance (Schwier, 2006). Such a definition also begs for a novel form of analyzing its organization. Unlike more conventional structures, the organization of snowboarding allows a variety of actors to get involved in leading the sport. By portraying and encouraging differentiated identities and lifestyles, athletes provide a space for other actors to find their place within the sport (Wheaton, 2005). According to Stegbauer's network theory, individual actors are able to obtain high positions and define their identity depending on their ties to actors and networks within the subculture (Stegbauer, 2008). For example, social capital, contacts within the sport and insider knowledge on subculture-related information enable actors to get closer to the core (Hitzler & Niederbacher, 2010). Actors who do not have close networks and allies within the subculture are less likely to engage successfully in the culture, whether as an individual or as a commercial actor (Thorpe, 2011). This study focuses on the organizational structure of snowboarding by comparing the development of the sport in Switzerland and New Zealand. An analysis of snowboarding in two nations with diverse cultures and economic systems allows a further definition of the structural organization of the sport and explains how brands play an important role in the sport.

Methods: The structural organization of the sport will be analyzed through an ethnographic approach, using participant observation at various leading events in Switzerland (Freestyle.ch, European Open) and New Zealand (World Heli Challenge, New Zealand Open, New Zealand Winter Games). The data is analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and gives an overview of the actors that are playing an important role in the local development of snowboarding. Participant observation was also used as a tool to get inside the sport culture and opened up the possibility to make over 40 semi-structured qualitative expert interviews with international core actors from 11 countries. Obtaining access to one actor as a partner early on helped to get inside the local sport culture. The 'snowball effect' allowed the researcher to acquire access, build trust and conduct interviews with experts within the core scene. All the interviewed actors have a direct influence on the sport in one or both countries, which permit a cross-analysis. The data of the interviews was evaluated through content analysis (Mayring 2010). The two methods together provided sufficient data to analyze the organizational structure and discuss the role of brand marketing within snowboarding.

Results: An actors mapping by means of a center-periphery framework has identified five main core groups: athletes, media representatives, brand-marketing managers, resort managers and event organizers. In both countries the same grouping of actors were found. Despite possessing different and frequently multiple roles and responsibilities, core actors appear to have a strong common identification as 'snowboarders', are considered to be part of the organizational elite of the sport and tend to advocate similar goals. The author has found that brands in Switzerland tend to have a larger impact on the broader snowboarding culture due to a number of factors discussed below. Due to a larger amount of snowboarders and stronger economic power in

Europe, snowboarders are making attempts to differentiate themselves from other winter sports, while competing with each other to develop niche markets. In New Zealand, on the other hand, the smaller market enables more cooperation and mutual respect within snowboarders. Further they are more closely linked to other winter sports and are satisfied with being lumped together. In both countries, brands have taken up the role of supporting young athletes, organizing competitions and feeding media with subculture-related content. Brands build their image and identity through the collaboration with particular athletes who can represent the values of the brand. Local and global communities with similar lifestyles and interests are being built around brands that share a common vision of the sport. The dominance of brands in snowboarding has enabled them with the power to organize and rule the sport through its fan base and supporters. Brands were defined by interviewees as independent institutions led by insiders who know the codes and symbols of the sport and were given trust and credibility. The brands identify themselves as the engines of the sport by providing the equipment, opportunities for athletes to get exposure, allowing media to get exclusive information on activities, events and sport-related stories. Differences between the two countries are more related to the economic system. While Switzerland is well integrated in the broader European market, New Zealand's geographical isolation and close proximity to Australia tends to limit its market. Further, due to different cultural lifestyles, access to resorts and seasonal restrictions, to name a few, the amount of people practicing winter sports in New Zealand is much smaller than in Switzerland. However, this also presents numerous advantages. For example, the short southern hemisphere winter season in New Zealand enables them to attract international sports athletes, brands and representatives in a period when Europe and North America is in summer. Further, the unique snow conditions in New Zealand and majestic landscape is popular for attracting world renowned photo- and cinematographers. Another advantage is the less populated network as it provides the opportunity for individuals to gain easier access to the core of the sport, obtain diverse positions and form a unique identity and market. In Switzerland, on the other hand, the snowboarding network is dense with few positions available for the taking. Homegrown brands with core recognition are found in both countries. It was found that the Swiss brands tend to have a larger impact on the market, whereas in New Zealand, the sport is more dependent on import products by foreign brands. Further, athletes, events and resorts in New Zealand are often dependent on large brand sponsorships from abroad such as from brand headquarters in the United States. Thus, due to its location in the centre of Europe, Swiss brands can take advantage of brands which are closer in proximity and culture to sponsor athletes and events. In terms of media coverage, winter sports in New Zealand tend to have a minor coverage and tradition in local mass media, which leads to less exposure, recognition and investment into the sport. This is also related to how snowboarding is more integrated into other winter sports in New Zealand. Another difference is the accessibility of the ski resort by the population. While in Switzerland the resorts are mostly being visited by day-travelers, 'weekend warriors' and holiday makers, the location of the resorts in New Zealand make it difficult to visit for one day. This is in part due to the fact that Swiss ski resorts and villages are usually the same location and are accessible through public transportation, while the ski resorts in New Zealand have been built separately from the villages. Further, the villages have not been built to accommodate to high tourist arrivals. Thus, accommodation and food facilities are limited and there is a lack of public transportation to the resorts.

Discussion: The findings show that networks and social relations combined with specific knowledge on scene-related attributes are crucial in obtaining opportunities within the sport. Partnerships as well as competition between these different actors are necessary for core acceptance, peer credibility and successful commercial interests. Brands need to maintain effective marketing strategies and identities which incorpo-

rate subcultural forms of behavior and communication. In order to sustain credibility from its fans, athletes and other snowboarding actors, brands need to maintain their insider status through social networks and commercial branding strategies. The interaction between all actors is a reciprocated process, where social capital, networks and identities are being shared. While the overall structure of snowboard subcultures in Europe and New Zealand are similar, there are some distinct characteristics which make each one unique.

References

- Adjouri, N. & Stastny, P. (2006). *Sport-Branding: Mit Sport-Sponsoring zum Markenerfolg*. Wiesbaden: Gabler.
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, K. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hebdige, D. (2009). *Subculture; The meaning of style*. New York: Routledge.
- Hitzler, R. & Niederbacher, A. (2010). *Leben in Szenen: Formen juveniler Vergemeinschaftung heute*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Mayring, P. (2010). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken*. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Schwieb, J. (2006). Repräsentationen des Trendsports. Jugendliche Bewegungskulturen, Medien und Marketing. In: Gugutzer, R. (Hrsg.). *body turn. Perspektiven der Soziologie des Körpers und des Sports*. Bielefeld: transcript (S. 321-340).
- Stegbauer, C. (2008). *Netzwerkanalyse und Netzwerktheorie. Ein neues Paradigma in den Sozialwissenschaften*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Thorpe, H. (2011). *Snowboarding bodies in theory and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wheaton, B. (2005). *Understanding lifestyle sports; consumption, identity and difference*. New York: Routledge.